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# OPERA AS A "SPECTACLE FOR THE EYE"

By FAUSTO TORREFRANCA

**H**ISTORIANS of music, when speaking of an opera-libretto of the seventeenth century, generally have in mind that scenic complex of dramatic absurdities and sentimental banalities which, after straying from the path of the refined and Hellenistic libretto followed by Rinuccini or Salvatori, and after losing itself later in the labyrinth of a revival of historic deeds and personages, was beginning—toward the end of the century—to be reformed by Apostolo Zeno. This is the pith of all that we know concerning this artistic product. And it is not enough; because, in my opinion, the libretto ought to form the foundation of the history of opera—more especially, as I shall show, in the seventeenth century. However, such is, naturally, not yet the case; for historians approaching this subject find themselves confronted by one of the most difficult problems which the history of Italian literature can present. And being, for the most part, not Italians, and having (except in rare instances) no thorough knowledge of our country's language and literature, they have subconsciously decided the question in the manner which struck them as most obvious and easy. However conscientious and serene it may be, there is no mind which, when confronted by problems of too great complexity and demanding immediate solution, is not prompted to do them violence, quite unconsciously, in order to simplify them and subject them to a clear and comprehensive systematization.

Thus it has been observed, and not without acumen, that the seventeenth-century libretto *in toto* might be reduced to an elementary formula which we shall simplify still further: The personage A loves the personage B, who, in turn, loves C; continuing similarly till the final X is reached, who, naturally, loves the initial A. The complications which may result do not alter in the least the fundamental banality and absurdity of this scheme; nor does the latter prevent the final solution from being the best possible in the best of possible worlds—the so-called "happy ending." This observation is exact; but it can only serve to prove that the libretto of the seventeenth century affords but meagre

human interest, or, to put it more plainly, psychological interest. And this, after all, very naturally; for these librettists were neither romantics nor the sons of romantics. But that does not preclude their work from furnishing an interest of another sort and of a highly esthetic nature.

Let us turn to another observation which has been made, and frequently repeated, about the seventeenth-century libretto. It has been said that, in the hands of the Venetians, in theatres nearly all of which were built by the great dogal families and by them thrown open to the public (such as the [Teatro] Grimano of S. Giovanni Grisostomo, the Vendramino of S. Salvatore, the theatre of the family of Tron di S. Cassiano, the Giustiniano di S. Moisè, and others), the *favola per musica*, with its mythological and therefore aristocratic plot, became the "opera," with its historical and therefore popular plot.

But this observation has a wholly secondary and collateral value. In point of fact, I shall show that this predilection for historical plots derived simply from the circumstance that they brought into prominence the most vital element of seventeenth-century opera, namely, the picturesque and mechanical (or, in one word, plastic) element which was manifested in the luxury of scenic decorations, in the richness and variety of the settings, in the extravagance of flying mechanisms, etc. Hence those are mistaken who believe that the transition from the myth to history denotes a tendency, in the libretto, toward a more psychological and realistical content. To convince one's self of the contrary, one has only to read any such work of the period between 1550 and 1590. On the other hand, the historians have not perceived that the abandonment of mythological plots in favor of historical ones, although it is an indication of the predominant importance of the scenic element in the opera, likewise includes a genuine and characteristic reaction against the tenuous, academic Hellenism of the Florentines, and (as will be proved) constitutes a kind of miniature *Sturm und Drang* of the *opera in musica* in opposition to the famous Aristotelian law of the unities in time, place, and action; etc. Such a *Sturm und Drang*, let it be understood, as the seventeenth century could afford; one which in itself was, at bottom, as academic and literary as the Hellenism that it opposed, but which, all the same, rested upon an absolutely Italian base of culture—a plastic culture. The opera of the seventeenth century is not, in fact, classic in the sense affirmed by Dent, who is, by the way, the sole author who has perceived, after a fashion, the importance (but not the predominance) of the scenic element in opera,

at least with regard to the period of Scarlatti. It is, on the contrary, anti-classic; that is, a reaction against the antiquarian classicism of the Florentines.

Finally, it has also been observed that the characters in the libretto with an historical base are totally unhistorical in their language, their customs and their actions—in everything, except their names. Not even their garb was historical; in this matter the costumers of the time permitted themselves the most absurd liberties. All this, too, has been exaggerated in the condemnation proceeding from the modern (and, because modern, wrong) point of view concerning historical revivals; and it has not been noticed that the majority of the libretti take care to distinguish the historical portion from the fantastic in the “Arguments” prefixed to the poetic texts—a sign that the poets knew what they were doing. But it was, in reality, hardly worth while to make note of such an obvious fact, for it is perfectly natural; there being no reason whatever why these characters should be different from the mythological personages of whom we have already spoken. Both are children of the same period; and that period had neither the eyes, nor the feelings, nor the nerves, to appreciate what we term the “psychology” of the dramatic person.

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Thus the seventeenth-century libretto presents a very slight psychological and dramatic interest. And the historians, who as yet have neither thought out nor divined what is the real foundation of the *opera in musica* (namely, scenography), and what served to render it popular, have all been led to wreak themselves on the music for the delusion suffered on reading certain libretti of that period.<sup>1</sup> And because the *opera in musica* arose (or, at least, is said to have arisen) with and from a musical innovation—the so-called invention of the song for one voice (monody) in contradistinction to song for several voices (the madrigal)—they said: Here we have the truly human element in the seventeenth-century opera—the music; monody. But this is an illusion produced by their romantic culture, more or less impregnated with Wagnerian prejudices. That same Monteverdi whom they exalt so high (and as might be expected, as a seventeenth-century Wagner!) was, to my thinking, far greater as a writer of madrigals and

<sup>1</sup> I say certain, rather than many, because the history of the libretto is still to be written, and the historians of music are acquainted with it only at second hand—either through historians of literature (Belloni, Solerti, etc.), or through a few *résumés* furnished by Ambros (Vol. IV).

*canzonette* (these latter often monodic) than as an opera-composer.

I shall be confronted with the unique "Lament of Arianna"; but this is, after all, such an isolated and exceptional case<sup>1</sup> that G. B. Doni himself considered it "the very principal part (of 'Arianna'), and perhaps the loveliest composition of our time in this style," whereas he thought the other operas of the period "of lesser worth." But this very lament is a further proof of the fact that the monody of the seventeenth century inclined toward a realization of abstract sentiments, rather than feelings ascribed to some dramatic personality, expressing them by musical exclamations and by cadences imitating those of emotional speech. In this its strength and its universal character are rooted; but herein also lies its dramatic weakness, characteristically Italian. The lament of Arianna, which did not fail to be sung in every house where there was a cembalo or a theorbo,<sup>2</sup> is inapproachable in style as a lament, and remained an unsurpassed model for its epoch. But, if we would consider it as an expression of Arianna's grief when abandoned by Teseo (that is, from an individualistic, romantic, modern point of view), it suddenly seems decidedly weak. Its sentimental and realistic value is great, but its dramatic value is very slight. For the words most strongly accentuated by the music are those in the outcry "Lasciatemi morire!" (which is wholly instinctive), and not those others which ought to have brought out musically what we call to-day the "psychological situation."

In conclusion, while deferring to a more fitting opportunity the complete historic and esthetic demonstration, I do not hesitate to affirm that the musical content of the melodrama, if thus examined by and for itself, does not possess the value which writers have liked to attribute to it. And this was, for the rest, a reflected value, not an immediate one, and hence better appreciated by the intellectuals of the period than by the general public—at least until Cavalli began to compose music evidently inspired by models (dances, more especially) which the various species of *canzoni* for solo voice, and of music for the lute, had made common property. Let us not deceive ourselves; seventeenth-century opera-music had much the same importance as the music which to-day accompanies the devolution of cinematographic films. That is to say, it was meant to be suggestive rather than dramatic, entertaining rather than emotional; and, above all, it had to be easily and instantly comprehensible. And the people had a craving for

<sup>1</sup> See G. B. Doni's "Trattato della Musica Scenica," Cap. IX; in Solerti, "Origini del Melodramma," p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Bonini, "Discorsi e Regole sopra la Musica," in Solerti, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

easy and instinctive music, precisely because they themselves no longer succeeded in creating such. Indeed, I believe the fact has not received due notice that, whereas in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we know that the musical life of the people was most vigorous, and while, in the sixteenth century, we find a whole literature of popular origin (that of the *villanelle*), in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the musical originality of the people diminished. And exactly during this period the opera provided them with a substitute for that which they could no longer create; and the operatic forms speedily became models whence popular song drew its inspiration, as in the *villote* (folk-songs in several parts), and the *canzonette di battello* (boat-songs). This came to pass when monodic song completed its transformation into *musica ariosa*, or the *aria*: terms which had, for the contemporary mind, no further signification than *canzonetta a ballo* (dance-song).<sup>1</sup>

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But monody possessed a far higher importance from the standpoint of scenic technics. And it is this peculiar importance—which the historians have not yet thought to set in proper relief—that we conceive to be fundamental: as having made the musical drama possible. Meanwhile, this song for solo voice permitted a character to be self-sustaining, even musically, and not to require the support of other voices, nor to be obliged, like the characters in Vecchi's 'Anfiparnaso,' to abstain from appearing on the stage. This last predicament would for ever have barred the way to the spread of the *opera in musica*, because (as cannot be too often repeated) the Italian people of that period had not yet arrived at the status of a nation of musical persons, of *auditors*, but formed a population educated esthetically by the plastic arts rather than by music, a nation of *visualists*.

However, monody—or, preferably, all the styles of music included in this form, so opportune for the scenic realization of the actor-singer—had a further high value from the viewpoint of the scenic movement. And the theatre-folk immediately became aware of this value. In fact, the "social" career of the *favola per musica* had hardly begun with the opening, to the paying public, of the first Venetian theatre of S. Cassiano (1637), when the librettist of Saccati's 'L'Ulisse Errante,' the Venetian patrician

<sup>1</sup> See Giulio Caccini, Preface to "Le Nuove Musiche," in Solerti, *op. cit.*, and also compare two passages on pp. 58 and 65.

Giacomo Badoaro, did not hesitate to assert, when writing a generic criticism (already by this time a criticism!) of the Opera, that "to allow more time for the Changes of Scene we have introduced Music in which we cannot escape an inverisimilitude" (page 12). And he adds, that another inverisimilitude in opera was the singing of two or three persons together. Fifty years before Saint-Evremond, the critique of the opera, and more particularly of song for solo voice and for several voices together, had been written from the realistic viewpoint of "verisimilitude!" So it is quite natural that Badoaro, convinced of the supreme importance of the scenic decorations over all else, should mention (on page 17) the scenographer of his 'Ulissee Errante,' and speak of him in this wise: "We have for our manager of machines and of scenes our most ingenious Torelli, who, by his incomparable services in years past, has won universal gratitude and popularity." Just before him, to be sure, he mentions the musician Sacrati (whom we know to have been one of the best of his time, although all his music has been lost); but he does so in terms which, however courteous, are far below the superlatives chosen for Torelli: "We enjoy in his stead [that is, instead of Claudio Monteverdi, who had died some time previous] the glorious efforts of Signor Francesco Sacrati; and of a truth it was needful that, to behold the splendors of this Moon, that Sun [Monteverdi] should first have set."

Let us take note, too, that these first years of the public theatre at Venice were certainly one of the most splendid periods of seventeenth-century stage-setting. However, as Badoaro points out, Torelli had already been engaged in Venice for several years; we know, in fact, that he had mounted 'La Finta Pazza' in 1641, 'Bellerofonte' in 1642, and 'La Venere Gelosa' in 1643. The scenes of 'La Finta Pazza' may still be viewed among the engravings in the Cabinet of Prints in the National Gallery at Paris and the Galleria Corsini at Rome; those of 'Bellerofonte' were inserted in the libretto, as was then the custom, and are preserved in Paris (Res. Yd. 55) in a copy which perhaps is unique; and some in the 'Venere Gelosa,' reprinted in Paris, are also to be found in the Cabinet of Prints at Paris (Tbb. 1), and are often offered for sale both in ink and in colors, adorned with titles and stage-directions. Some of these appear to be identical with those of 'La Finta Pazza,' in all but a few unimportant details. It is entirely possible that the expense of the scenic preparations prompted the directors of the *Novissimo* to adapt at least some scenes in 'La Finta Pazza' for 'La Venere Gelosa.' This very thing was done at Paris when the stage-settings of 'Orfeo,' by Luigi Rossi, which had been devised

by the aforesaid Torelli, were adapted for Corneille's 'Andromède.' In fact, the scenes in 'La Finta Pazza' had gained such celebrity that Cardinal Mazzarini was moved to call Torelli to Paris and entrust to him the mounting of Rossi's 'Orfeo' and Caproli's 'Nozze di Teti e di Peleo.' Concerning Torelli's sojourn in Paris, Prunières<sup>1</sup> furnishes many interesting documents; which relieves me of the necessity to speak of it more at length.

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We may find confirmation of the importance of scenography and the scenographer in the fact that, from the very beginnings of public stage-plays in Venice, we note three scenographers who are explicitly mentioned in the libretti. Among the best of the many celebrities which the century could boast were two: Giovanni Burnacini, the father of Ludovico, the scenographer of 'Il Pomo d'Oro' (Vienna, 1666), and Torelli; while the third was a certain Gasparo Beccari, the scenographer of 'La Ninfa Avara' and 'L'Amore Innamorato' (theatre of S. Moisè). But above all others, the spectacles produced in the theatre of SS. Giovanni e Paolo were long cherished in the memory of the Venetians, since De Boni, Ivanovich, *et al.*, kept them in remembrance. Ivanovich, the author of the earliest "Memorie teatrali di Venezia" now extant,<sup>2</sup> though he barely mentions the other theatres, discourses thus eloquently touching the theatre of SS. Giovanni e Paolo:

In this theatre are produced, during the Carnival, musical works with marvellous changes of scene, majestic pageants, the finest machinery, and miraculous flights, while one may generally view the splendors of the Heavens, Deities, Seas, Kingdoms, Palaces, Groves, Forests, and other beauteous and delightful displays. The Music is always exquisite, selection being made from the best voices of the City, and bringing others from Rome, Germany, and other places, especially women, who with their beauty of face, the richness of their costumes, the charm of their singing, and the action proper to the personages whom they represent, cause amazement and admiration. The effects are similar in the theatres of S. Salvatore and S. Cassiano.

And on page 388, comparing the theatres of Venice with those of ancient Rome, Ivanovich proves that he, like all his contemporaries, perfectly understands wherein the difference existing between these two epochs actually lies: that is to say, not at all

<sup>1</sup> H. Prunières, "L'Opéra en France avant Lully." Paris, 1914.

<sup>2</sup> See Minerva al Tavolino, at end of book.

in the effect of the *nuove musiche*, but most decidedly in the mode of employing the scenographic art. He remarks, in fact:

So to-day theatrical performances with music have been introduced as a solace for the spirit, and as a most artistic recreation wherein are displayed Machines of great ingenuity, suggested by the Drama, forming a grand attraction amid the Pomp of the Scenes, and costumes, which gratify in full the universal curiosity. Thus there have been seen, on the stage, real Elephants, live Camels, Chariots drawn majestically by Wild Beasts and by Horses, Horses likewise in the Air, Horses which dance, the most superb Machines, displayed in the air, on the ground, on the sea with extravagant contrivances, and with admirable inventions to bring down from the Air Royal Halls, with all the Personages, and Musicians, as illuminated by nighttime, and to make them reascend in most astounding fashion, and a thousand other things, which being printed in the Dramas, it is superfluous to describe them with particularity, all persons being able to inform themselves fully by reading the same, which will serve as a pleasing and at the same time profitable diversion for *Geni virtuosi* [or, as we should say to-day, the intellectuals].

These quotations from Ivanovich will show that it was thus early recognized that the perusal of the libretti evoked visions of scenico-plastic display (or, of plastic virtuosity) rather than poetic images;—a fact which adds weight to my thesis, and all the more because no mention whatsoever is made of the importance of the music—which we, wrongly, suppose to have been great. Ivanovich, it should be noted, was no non-professional in the life of the theatre, being the author of sundry libretti, some of which he himself names: 'L'Amor Guerriero,' 'La Circe,' 'Il Coriolano,' 'La Costanza Trionfante'; consequently, his observations have a very material historic and psychological value.

We shall not dwell on the importance ascribed by him to the scenographic element; that stands out clearly from the context. But notice the importance of the phrase "the Music is always exquisite, selection being made from the best voices." The exquisiteness of the music—and, in the language of the period, *isquisitezza* has nearly the same meaning as *grazia* for the Florentines of the earliest melodramas,<sup>1</sup> that is to say, ingratiating force and inspiration at one and the same time—this exquisiteness is a characteristic emanating from the voices, or depending on the interpreters. The composers of the music are not even named. Nor is this all; beauty of face and richness of the costumes present themselves to the writer's mind in precedence to the "charm of the singing" and the acting; such was the importance then

<sup>1</sup> See the adaptations of Peri by Caccini, the essay by Della Valle, and the other documents published in Solerti, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

attached to everything decorative, conspicuous, sensuous. Theatre-goers went to see beautiful scenes and beautiful women, and to hear beautiful voices. The libretto was the peg on which to hang "scenes" and "changes of scene"; whereas the music served to bring out beautiful voices. And, while discussing this point, it should be observed that there was not one famous and popular opera of the seventeenth century which, during its peregrinations, did not suffer modifications in the libretto and the music (more frequently in the latter than the former), either, as the phrase went, "to adapt it to the present taste," or to "satisfy the taste of messieurs the musicians." And this "taste" signifies nothing but caprice, pretext, pose, fashion. 'Dori,' 'Giasone,' 'Alessandro vincitor di sè stesso,' etc., etc., all shared this fate, as may be traced in the successive editions of the libretti. But we can rest assured that these cases represent only a very small part of those which actually occurred, and which, so to say, escaped publication.

The audiences, then, were so little exacting in musical matters (even in the case of well-known and oft-repeated operas), that they were not in the least disturbed by the alterations inflicted on the musical text by the hands of (not infrequently) second-rate composers. On the contrary, we can boldly assert that they took pleasure in them. It were useless to be scandalized by this, and wrong to make the deduction that the level of musical culture was then very low. Unquestionably, it was not so high as in the sixteenth century. Still, one ought to call it different, rather than lower. The musical culture of the sixteenth century was an aristocratic culture; the dilettanti of that period, both men and women, were accomplished musicians; they could read a madrigal at sight, accompany a solo voice on the lute with a sight-arrangement of the other parts for the instrument, or execute extemporized *diminuzioni* and variations. But it must be remarked that they were, for the most part, gentlemen and gentlewomen of the courts.<sup>1</sup> The common people had their own popular songs—those popular songs whereof we see a clear reflection in the *frottole*, and in that more distinctively sixteenth-century product, the *villanelle*. Besides, they listened with devotion and respect (possibly not lacking in a certain obtuseness) to the music which accompanied the sacred ritual in the churches—the organ-music of a Gabrieli or a Luzzaschi, and the vocal compositions of a Palestrina or a Nanini. But in the seventeenth century the musical culture of the courts was on the wane (so we are assured, for example, by

See B. Castiglioni, "Il Cortegiano," Lib. II, § XI-XIII.

Giustiniani), and music, through the medium of opera, began to hold sway over the people in an easy and seductive form, precisely because it was supported by scenographic and choreographic spectacles of great magnificence, and by the spell of exquisite voices, lovely forms, and rich costumes. The level of seventeenth-century musical culture was, therefore, as compared with that of the sixteenth century, neither higher nor lower, but merely different. In reality, it is impossible to institute a comparison between two epochs so diverse the one from the other. The reason for this circumstance is not simply musical, but general, and it does not properly belong to the history of music, but rather to that of general culture. In fact, while the sixteenth century was still attuned to the grace, to the eurythmy, to the transparency wherein, for instance, the paintings of the fifteenth century found their inspiration, the seventeenth turns wholly toward a new principle—the principle of boldness of movement, of restlessness, whose realization we view in baroque architecture and the paintings of the Bolognese school. Every species of mutation or transformation was sure to please. Variety had become the patroness of Art. And thus scenography became, in its turn, the true Muse of the melodramatic stage.

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The public, which did not require much of its favorite composers (it sufficed if the music moved them more or less and suited the singers, and was calculated to show off the beauty and agility of the voices), was, on the other hand, very exacting in the matter of scenography—precisely because the stage-settings gave them an opportunity to raise hymns and burn incense to the goddess of the period: Variety.

Variety required that the characters should be numerous; there were no less than thirty-three in the opera '*Le Fatiche d'Ercole per Deianira*,' the libretto by Aurelio Aureli, set to music by P. A. Ziani, and produced in the Teatro Grimano in 1662. It presents allegorical personages, gods, demigods, heroes, and—as if this were not enough—this vast Olympus is encircled by seven full choruses. Twenty-five years of social existence had sufficed to make of the opera nothing but a "spectacle for the eye," enhanced by song and sound. If eighteenth-century opera could be called a "concert" constituted of a series of arias and ensemble-pieces interrupted by long recitatives, the opera of the seventeenth

century should be considered as a "spectacle." When the opera is for the eyes, the music occupies second place. Aureli himself confirms this by words whose meaning is indisputable; for, after taking such pains to set in motion so great an array of characters, he feels the need of asking the indulgence of the public in the few traditional lines dedicated by "The Author to the Reader" (page 5):

At the present time the people of the City of Venice are become so fastidious in their taste for the Drama that they no longer know that they desire to see [N.B., not to *hear*], nor can the intellect of the author devise any invention to win himself the applause of the spectators, or to meet the wishes of the greater part (it being impossible to please all).

One extremely curious detail occurs in the citation which follows; it shows clearly how erroneous is the opinion held by those who think that the compilation of a seventeenth-century libretto was one of the easiest and most commonplace matters pertaining to the literature of that period. Aureli himself remarks:

I hope you will recognize, having regard to the pains I have taken with Ercole, the difference there is between writing in haste and composing with a mind at ease, and at one's leisure. I confess that, as to these (pains), I have exerted myself more than in my other Dramas to gratify your taste . . . I beg you to bear in mind, that there is no composition more difficult than that intended for the Stage.

The "composition" of a libretto was, therefore, considered such a difficult matter that one of the best librettists of the time (for such Aureli really was) could venture to say so without fear of incurring ridicule. And, nevertheless, such a difficult piece of writing received scant appreciation, if any; so scant, at any rate, that we must place some reliance on the sagacious sentence in which, shortly before, the poet declares that he is not writing "with ambition to immortalize himself in opera, which, being entirely set to music, has no other foundation than the air" (in the physical, not in the musical sense).

Hence, the libretto of the '*Fatiche d'Ercole per Deianira*' is opulent in scenic show. And in any event, the exigence of the public with regard to staging and machines must have increased inordinately; for, in the libretto of '*Il Gran Macedone*,' set to music by Boniventi and produced at the theatre of S. Cassiano in the year 1690, the poet (or rather the impresario), thinking that he had not sufficiently provided for the spectators in offering them eleven scenes in three acts and with three machines, considered it

expedient to excuse himself by printing, at the conclusion of the libretto (page 69), the following notice:

Most benevolent Reader. Should you observe that in the Opera, during one and the same Scene, like that of the ruins of the Galleries [*Loggie dirupate*], certain Personages appear more than once, we crave your indulgence, there being no device whereby the changes of Scene could be redoubled [*sic!*].

Matters had reached such a pass, then, that (the text is ambiguous and capable of various interpretations) with each change of scene not more than one person might enter, or that the same person might not enter more than once.

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In the libretti of that period we find many names interesting for the history of scenography, although they are far less numerous than we should expect. Indeed, it is a legend that the scenographer's name was not rarely mentioned in preference to the musician's. This happened only (seldom, even then) when the composer's name might naturally be omitted, seeing that everybody knew it (for instance, in 'Alessandro vincitor di sè stesso,' by Cavalli). In fact, the composer is named in but five out of twenty-six libretti relating to Cavalli, as catalogued by Wotquenne. The truth is, that the musician's name won lasting popularity through some song distinguished above the rest for its beauty and facility, and passed from mouth to mouth, so that there was no need of printing it; whereas it was proper that the scenographer, changing with each change of theatre, should be mentioned. And yet, after examining several hundred libretti of the seventeenth century, we can affirm that, except in a few isolated cases, the name of the scenographer is, as a rule, accompanied by that of the musician. Contrariwise, it very often happens that the musician, and not the scenographer, is named; and, for one case in which the musician is ignored, there are at least ten where the scenographer is left out. And, on the other hand, the dedications and prefaces were almost always written and signed by the librettists; and seventeenth-century litterati while generally recognizing the practical importance of scenography as a lure for the public, were not especially inclined—somewhat out of jealousy, somewhat from academic *morgue*—to recognize the esthetic value as an integral part of the melodrama, let alone the historical value. With the exception of a fugitive note by Marco da Gagliano<sup>1</sup> and a few others, and in

<sup>1</sup> A. Solerti, op. cit. p. 82.

the eighteenth century only by Arteaga and Planelli, by Martelli and Algarotti, do we find *la Prospettiva* (as the scenographic art was then called, in agreement with essayists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) definitely considered as an essential part of the melodrama. Innocent of ideologisms, of romanticisms, of futile contempt for the art of the past, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* already stirs the intuition of Italians in the eighteenth century, and produces a Jomelli and a Gluck.

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Scenography assumes, therefore, a place of the highest importance in the history of opera, and more especially, it seems to us, in the seventeenth century; for during that period it passes from the fairly schematic simplicity of Alfonso and Giulio Parigi's Florentine scenes into the architectonic exuberance of Ferdinando Bibiena. But the history of seventeenth-century scenography is, unhappily, still to be written. In Italy we possess a good book on the history of scenography, which we owe to Professor G. Ferrari, himself a scenographer.<sup>1</sup> And this is the sole work of its kind now in existence, so far as I know. But it is singularly deficient in historical and bibliographical names and data concerning the scenography of the seventeenth century—a circumstance which need cause no surprise; for only a specialist in music-history and, furthermore, one who is not ill-informed in the history of painting, could carry out such an undertaking. We also have Wotquenne's catalogue of libretti, adorned with stage-scenes borrowed from the libretti. The material is valuable, but insufficient, because (for example) it does not include a single scene by Torelli or Domenico Mauro, nor does it illustrate the extraordinary architectonic fancy of Ferdinando Bibiena, of whom it is related that he exaggerated, in theatrical architecture, the baroque style of Borromini, the great emulator of Bernini. Moreover, Wotquenne frequently neglects to cite, in his catalogue, the names of the scenographers (for instance of "Fortune di Rodope e Damira," 1657; "Nerone," 1681; "Erismena," 1655; "Artaxerse," 1669; "Avvenimenti d'Orinda," 1659; "Coriolano," 1669; and many others), which shows that he did not attach too great importance to the scenographic portion of the libretti. And this finds confirmation in the fact that he always fails to record the Changes of Scene, which, on the contrary, are never omitted in the libretti.

<sup>1</sup> G. Ferrari, "La Scenografia. Cenni storici dall' evo classico ai nostri giorni." Milan, 1902.

Wishing to demonstrate the importance of seventeenth-century scenography, even from a strictly documentary point of view, I have carried out long and patient researches beginning, not with an examination of the libretti (which, in the Italian collections consulted by me, are very often minus illustrations), but with the material treasured in the collections of prints. I have scrutinized the prints relating to theatrical matters contained in the collections at Rome, Florence, Paris, London, in the Theatrical Museum at La Scala in Milan, and in the libraries of the Liceo Musicale of Bologna, the Conservatorio of Naples, of S. Cecilia and Casanatense. I have succeeded, frequently with much trouble, in identifying nearly all (I may say, practically all) the prints preserved in the above collections. I have also had the good fortune to discover much new material, and the pleasure of recognizing that this material, all deriving from the libretti of the epoch, is, though not very abundant, at least considerable. Excepting Burnacini *films*, who can be studied only in Vienna, and the Bibienas, of whom, apparently, not many scenographic reproductions for use in libretti are extant,<sup>1</sup> this material is adequate to illustrate a history of scenography and scenographers in the seventeenth century. And, as I have indicated, the names of the scenographers can be gleaned, at least in part, from the libretti and also from short histories and local monographs of theatres, academies, etc. But this is not the time for drawing such a sketch, which I shall leave for subsequent publication.

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Before closing, however, one matter still remains to be explained, namely, the assertion (which many probably thought strange) that the favor enjoyed by the scenography of the seventeenth century resulted from a reaction against the academic and antiquarian type of the Florentine libretto *à la* Rinuccini or Salvatori. In point of fact, from about 1640 onward we find, in libretti like 'L'Ulisse Errante' by Badoaro, with music by Sacrati (1644), or 'La Sincerità Trionfante' (1639) by Ottaviano Castelli, with music by Cecchini, dissertations against the Aristotelian laws and in favor of a liberty of imagination which strike us as an anachronism, although they are not an anachronism.

<sup>1</sup> The *scenari* of two operas were reproduced in rough cuts, with which Bibiena himself was dissatisfied, in a miscellanea, "Disegni delle scene che servano alle due opere che si rappresentano l'anno corrente nel Reggio Teatro di Torino, ecc." (date?) quoted by Ferrari, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

Other poets, though protesting against the laws, still feel under the necessity of citing the authority of Spanish dramaturgists, or simply appeal to the "spirit of the times." Thus Busenello, in defiance of the Aristotelian law of the unity of time, declares shortly that he suits his own convenience:

This opera ('Didone,' 1641) is influenced by modern views. It is not made as the ancient rules prescribe, but according to Spanish usage; it represents years, not hours. He who writes, gratifies (his own) taste.

A Florentine would not have dared make this assertion; nor would he have confessed to Spanish influences—a circumstance which we consider highly important, and which has hitherto escaped the notice of historians. These poets discuss esthetics in such wise as their age permits, but—as may seem very strange to many—they eschew academics. Later, however, the discussions of the differences subsisting between libretto and tragedy will assume an academic aspect. And in so far the famous reform of Metastasio must be considered, from the standpoint of modern freedom, to be a retrogression, when confronted with this much-abused, and yet so free and brilliant, libretto of the seventeenth century. And, as already remarked, one need only read the lengthy preface (The Publisher to the Reader) of Ferrari's 'Andromeda' (that is to say, of the very first opera played before a paying audience) to comprehend that the Venetian melodrama instantly differentiated itself from the Florentine not merely, as has been incessantly repeated, from the day on which it possessed a libretto with an historic basis ('L'Incoronazione di Poppea,' set to music by Monteverdi), but rather from the day when it had, in 'Andromeda' (1637), a libretto in which the resources of scenography were given the most prominent place—far more than was the case with the *Intermedi* at the close of the sixteenth century and in the first decades of the seventeenth. Even in the music of 'Andromeda' one can perceive a sign of reaction against the excessive Hellenistic scruples of the Florentines. At the end of the first two acts they actually sung, not something in the shape of a monody, but "madrigals in several parts, concerted with various instruments." And the preface of 'Andromeda' is, at bottom, a long description of scenes and machines, interspersed with eulogies of the singers, all of whom are named, whereas (N.B.) the scenographer is not mentioned.<sup>1</sup> To tell the truth, the scenes changed only from

<sup>1</sup> I think I have identified him as Giovanni Burnacini.

*Boschereccia* to *Maritima* (woodland to maritime views), and *vice versa*; but the machines, and the flights of machines and personages, suffice to reveal the tendency underlying the development of the Venetian libretto. Though this libretto favored historical plots in the end, this was not at all due either to a stronger human interest on the part of artists or public, or (much less) to any historical instinct; which latter, as we might prove, was lacking in the Italian consciousness, and constituted (and still constitutes, to a great degree) the chief deficiency in the national life. History, or—to be more exact—the historical background of a fact, had the advantage, to be sure, of presenting names like Cæsar, Nero and Scipio, or regions (in the Orient, more particularly), which impressed the Venetian spectators as being closer to their life and therefore more intelligible than the gods of Olympus and the heroes of Greek mythology. But the principal advantage (one to which the historians' most careful consideration is invited) was the opportunity afforded for lavish display and, above all, a vast variety of scenographic tableaux, such as the world of mythology with its realms of Pluto, its feasts of the gods, its Ionic or Corinthian temples, and its Homeric duels, was quite incapable of presenting. The pictorial and plastic sense of the Italians, made keen by training, and finally excited and exacerbated by four centuries of uninterrupted florescence, as manifested by the numerous regional schools in all parts of Italy, had early discarded the too tenuous and colorless mythological world wherein, on the contrary, the Florentine melodrama had sought refuge to dream a life of Hellenistic illusions—a Calypso's grotto, as it were, of literature and culture. In its origin the melodrama is the fruit of a belated humanisticism, and likewise of a humanisticism having a musical character which is essentially anachronistic, because it occurs at the time when Italian musical culture, after Palestrina, was exhibiting signs of decadence. Hence, the study of and the love for the ancients, which have left so many traces on the plastic arts and the architecture of Italy, have had no important influence on what relates to the intrinsic substance of theatrical music.

Most profound differences subsist between the Greek tragedy and the Italian melodrama; and there is certainly no such ideal nexus as we find, for example, between antique sculpture or architecture and those of the Renaissance.

Monody, in my opinion, did not attain its highest expression in the melodrama, but in instrumental music, aided therein by that musical revolution which liberated the lower voices from polyphonic

subjection—Viadana's intuitive perception of the bass as an independent and continuous part, the so-called *basso continuo*. Possibly the *basso continuo* was of far greater importance than monody for the modern epoch. Indeed, we should reflect that monody, sooner or later, would inevitably have resulted from Viadana's innovation; whereas we never could have obtained the opposite result—the evolution, through the means of a free high voice (monody), of another free low voice.

Now, this observation substantiates the preceding one: because instrumental music is the flower of our civilization, it is precisely that which differentiates our epoch from the Hellenic epoch; it is the antithesis to the conception of art and of life which was held by the Greeks.

(Translated by Theodore Baker)